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INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 000572

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/05/2017

TAGS: PREL PGOV PREF ARABL EG IZ

SUBJECT: IRAQI FOREIGN MINISTER ZEBARI ON REGIONAL
CONSULTATIONS AND ARAB LEAGUE MEETINGS

REF: CAIRO 559

Classified by Ambassador Francis Ricciardone for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

¶11. (C) Iraqi Foreign Minister Zebari told the Ambassador on March 3 that he was working with the Egyptian government and UNHCR to ease residency requirements for the growing number of Iraqis in Egypt. On Egypt-Iraq relations, Zebari said he had selected a candidate for Ambassador to Cairo, but confirmation and agreement remained contentious within the GOI. Planning for upcoming meetings of Iraq's neighbors is at the top of Zebari's agenda: Egypt's Foreign Minister was "positive" regarding GOE participation at a March 10 Baghdad Neighbors meeting. The Ambassador encouraged Iraqi participation in Bright Star, an Egyptian-hosted regional military exercise to be held in September. End summary.

Refugees

¶12. (C) The Ambassador met briefly on March 3 with Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari, a long-time personal acquaintance, who was in Egypt to attend an Arab League ministerial meeting in advance of the League's March 28-29 Riyadh Summit. Zebari, who had just finished meeting with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, detailed his talks with senior GOE officials over the growing number of Iraqis in Egypt. Registration for these people in Egypt, he said, was becoming "a problem." He said he told Egyptian Intelligence Chief Omar Soliman that Iraq "wants these people to come back," to help rebuild the country when conditions permit. In the meantime, Iraq will "do its part," he asserted, but assistance from neighbors is required to provide these people and their families with health care, education, and other basic services. Zebari also complained of the challenge of issuing new Iraqi passports. Centralized printing in Baghdad of 3,000 passports daily is insufficient for the 5 million required. Zebari also mentioned his concern that among the new Iraqi arrivals in Egypt was a growing number of former Army and Intelligence officers from the Saddam era.

Iraq-Egypt Relations

¶13. (C) Zebari said that Egypt was allowing senior members of the former "Iraqi Army and Intelligence" to reside in Cairo. He added that, when confronted, Egyptian officials denied the charge. Zebari also noted approvingly that Egypt's intelligence service had "increased its presence" in Iraq. Asked why Iraq had still not sent an Ambassador to Cairo,

Zebari admitted "the problem is in Baghdad. We selected one of our best diplomats (my deputy), a secular Shia and career diplomat, to serve in Cairo." The GOE has accepted him, but members of the GOI were obstructing his appointment "over politics." Zebari added that he would formally nominate the diplomat in May, when he submits a list of nominees to the Council of Representatives for confirmation. The Ambassador strongly encouraged Zebari and the GOI to place a senior, seasoned diplomat in Cairo as soon as possible, especially one comfortable speaking on camera who can challenge the widespread disinformation and bias over present circumstances in Iraq. Zebari agreed that the nominee should receive media training -- as Zebari himself had done.

¶4. (C) Regarding a recent failed attempt to arrange a visit to Egypt by President Talabani, Zebari blamed the last-minute cancellation on the GOI's own Presidential Protocol staff and their excessive demands. Despite his personal appeals to Talabani and his assurances that Egypt would manage the visit appropriately, Zebari was unable to overrule the Protocol staff - the result of which was damage to Iraq-Egypt ties. "Our government," he complained, "needs to act more professionally and more realistically." As another example, Zebari entirely blamed NSA Rubaie for "botching" Saddam's execution.

Neighbors Meetings

¶5. (C) Zebari said he had two agenda items for his visit to Cairo: to obtain regional buy-in for a meeting of Iraq's neighbors in Baghdad on March 10, and to encourage stronger Arab commitments to Iraq at the March 28-29 AL Summit in

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Riyadh. Zebari said Iraq had "worked for months" to arrange the Baghdad neighbors meeting. The Secretary's February 27 public remarks committing the U.S. to participate in that meeting, he added, were "excellent." While the Iraqis understand there will be no direct talks between the USG and Iranian/Syrian representatives, the meeting offered a chance to "break the ice" -- a "win-win" situation for everyone, he said. It was crucial, he continued, for the neighbors to show their support for Iraq's government and the Baghdad Security Plan. "We will hold them (the neighbors) to their security commitments," he added.

¶6. (C) On the issue of a follow on ministerial of Iraq's neighbors and others, Zebari said a decision would emerge during ongoing regional consultations and at the sub-ministerial in Baghdad. He did not reference possible GOE efforts to link their participation at the March 10 meeting to their hosting of a ministerial (reftel). Zebari said he consulted Egyptian FM Aboul Gheit, and said the latter was "positive." (Note: Aboul Gheit likewise was positive in a subsequent conversation with the Ambassador. End note) Zebari noted intense interest among European and other missions in Baghdad to participate in the March 10 meeting, and said the GOI would transport participants by charter flight en masse from Amman. He assured the Ambassador that the meeting - to be held outside the Green Zone - would be well-protected.

Bright Star

¶7. (C) The Ambassador recalled his personal efforts to prompt an Egyptian invitation for Iraq to participate in the September 2005 Bright Star regional military exercises held every two years in Egypt. The Egyptian Field Marshall personally approved the invitation, but the Iraqi officers who had accepted the invitation failed to show up. The Ambassador encouraged Iraq to send a representative to the September 2007 Bright Star exercise. Zebari welcomed the

Ambassador's advice and committed to following up on the issue with the Minister of Defense in Baghdad.

RICCIARDONE